

# BARBADOS

A Look Into This Island Nation's No. 1 Industry

*Learning the meaning of "Bet who bet you."*

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

BRIDGETOWN, BARBADOS: My interview with David M. Rice, president and CEO of Barbados Tourism Authority, started off on a high note with a warm handshake. The two of us sat down for a 90-minute discussion. I was interested in learning how a country, whose number one industry is tourism, is faring.

Barbados has always intrigued me. Its British influence and island culture create an appealing combination. The country is the most easterly island in the Caribbean island chain. Its small size (only 21 miles long) creates an intimate, relaxed atmosphere. You can circumnavigate the entire country in less than three hours. Though independent (it gained full independence in 1966), Barbados embraces its British Empire roots. Cricket is the national sport, roundabouts are common on the roads, and afternoon tea is still a tradition.



David M. Rice,  
President & CEO,  
Barbados Tourism Authority

## WATCHING HIS COUNTRY MATURE

Born in the Parish of St. Michael (there are 11 parishes in Barbados), Rice was primarily raised by his grandmother and aunts.

"My dad was ADC to the Governor of Grenada. I traveled to Grenada during holidays and summer vacations to spend time with my parents," remembered Rice. "We were a middle income family and I was always outdoors. Like most Barbadians, I learned to swim at a young age and bicycled around sugar cane fields after school."

As a young man, Rice moved to Massachusetts to continue his education and explore the world. "I clearly remember my first job interview in the United States. It was on Columbus Day for a job at the Hilton Boston Logan Airport.

"The hotel manager jokingly said that anyone who applied for a job on Columbus Day, in Boston, deserved a shot," laughed Rice. "And, I've been associated with the travel and tourism industry ever since that interview three decades ago."

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Two years ago, Rice received an invitation to return to Barbados and oversee tourism on the island. The offer was a 'big deal.' Tourism is the engine that drives the Barbadian economy.

"I was living in San Diego at the time and had never worked in the public sector," continued Rice. "I considered this an opportunity to reconnect with my roots and help my country. I hit the ground running and was impressed with the pool of well educated staffers in the tourism department. The right of a free, quality education to all Barbadians has played a pivotal role in the evolution of our country. It has created a literate, stable, vibrant work force and has afforded our entire population an opportunity for a better future. Compared to 30 years ago, we have so many bright, sophisticated citizens, I know Barbados is in 'good hands.'"

## BAJIAN LIFE

Rice readily admits the job is a complex task. England produces the island's largest number of visitors, closely followed



by America. The Caribbean, Canada, and Continental Europe round out the top five markets.

"We must be nimble to respond to trends in individual countries," cautioned Rice. "Our numbers are up strongly this year, but I still consider the worldwide tourism industry to be fragile. Events that happen thousands of miles away can impact us. When the volcano erupted in Iceland several years ago, many British Airways and Virgin Atlantic flights from the UK were cancelled. Our economy," Rice winced, "took a real hit."

Barbados has always been considered a haven for winter weary travelers. Typical November through April weather is dry with temps in the low 80s.

Two widely held myths are that Barbados is only for the wealthy and the only time of year to visit is during the winter

**Barbados was the only vacation destination in the Western Hemisphere with scheduled Concorde service. Travel time from London to Barbados was a short four hours, versus nine hours for a Boeing 747. Today, one of the retired British Airways Concorde is on display at the airport.**

season. "The truth is," declared Rice, "we are a luxury destination with vacation options to suit every demographic. The island is known for its grand resorts and hotels, but we are also ideal for generational family travel. We have seen a strong demand for our villa rentals which allow for the whole family to be under one roof. Travel to Barbados has also become more affordable. Having JetBlue start service lowered fares across the board. I think you



might be pleasantly surprised how competitive our ticket prices are compared to the rest of the Caribbean."

"The government has worked to offer reasons to visit Barbados year round. Our rich cultural history, strong traditions, religious values, and warm salutations make our country a

great place to visit no matter what time of year," smiled Rice. "Some of our more popular celebrations are the Crop Over Festival in August, celebrating the final cutting of the sugar cane harvest; our Food, Wine, Rum Festival each November; and the Oistins Fish Festival in February commemorating our strong fishing heritage and connection to the sea."

In recent years, polo has also become a big tourist draw. Barbados has four professional polo fields and hosts many big tournaments. "We draw teams from all over the world, including South Africa, India, Argentina, Uruguay for the well attended competitions," said Rice.

*WELCOME TO "LITTLE ENGLAND"*

Named after a crude bridge constructed by the first Indian settlers, the capital city of Barbados is Bridgetown.

Located nine miles (about a 20-minute drive) from the airport, Bridgetown is known as a large shipping port and home to one of the oldest parliaments in the Western Hemisphere. Today, along with the typical services to sup-



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY BARBADOS TOURISM AUTHORITY



(From far left) The Watering Hole, one of many rum shops where one can enjoy a chat with the locals. Stilt Walkers at the Crop Over Festival, celebrating the end of the sugar cane harvest. (Bottom) The south and west coasts, with turquoise blue water, is a playground for all water sports. There are four polo fields for matches throughout the year.



**First produced in Barbados 370 years ago, rum is big business on the island. This is not a surprise since rum's main ingredient is sugar. For centuries, English sailors would stock up on rum produced in Barbados as proof positive they indeed crossed the Atlantic Ocean.**

port the country of 270,000, the capital city offers a range of noteworthy things to do from horse racing at the historical Garrison Savannah to visiting nearby historic churches. If you are in the market, there are numerous stores selling duty free diamond jewelry. Some of the more popular outdoor ocean excursions include catamaran cruises, swimming with the turtles, and submarine tours. On land, consider an Island Safari Tour in a modified Toyota Land Cruiser. The tour is the best way to "take in" the whole island and tour Barbados' sugar cane factories and its old forts (one of the more historic sites is Gun Hill located in St. George Parish in the middle of the island).

*INDULGING IN COU COU AND MACARONI PIE*

St. Lawrence Gap on the South Coast (20 minutes from Bridgetown) offers the liveliest nightlife on the island. Establish your "base of operations" at the well managed, boutique hotels of Turtle Beach or Casurina and treat

yourself to restaurants, offering every imaginable cuisine; nightclubs; and ample shopping.

Also consider a visit to 1st Street and 2nd Street (15 minutes from Bridgetown) with its rows of cafes, bars, and live Calypso music. A nice pit stop is The Cliff Restaurant specializing in international dishes.

Another popular destination, located in the center of the island and close to Harrison's Cave, is the Country View Bar and Grill. The restaurant offers spectacular views of Bridgetown and beaches on both the west and south coasts. Be sure to sample bread fruit (with the texture of a sweet potato), macaroni pie (think baked macaroni with cheddar cheese and bread crumbs), and cou cou and flying fish (a local fish steamed with cornmeal and okras).

*THE TALE OF DIFFERENT COASTS*

Without question, the beaches are the main draw on the island. Due to the unusual shape of Barbados, it offers

**Explore Harrison's Cave mid-island. The 45-minute tour, via electric tram, allows you to explore stalagmites, stalactites, fresh water pools and waterfalls, and dramatic limestone formations.**

dramatically different beach experiences on the west, south, and east coasts.

On the west coast (commonly referred to as the Platinum Coast), the ocean breeze is tranquil and the waters are calm. You can walk for miles along unbroken white sand beaches and admire the occasional clusters of coral jutting out of the water. Many of the larger resorts are located here and the water has been described as a "giant turquoise bathtub."

Two noteworthy visits on the west coast are Brighton Stables, offering horseback riding on Brighton Beach, the longest unbroken stretch of beach in Barbados, and the small Pile Bay fishing village where, during certain times of the year (usually December and January), fresh water springs bubble up through the sand on the beach. The water is so fresh, you can actually drink it.

The south coast features some of the more picturesque beaches. Crane Beach with its bleached white sand against a backdrop of swaying palm trees is known as a popular magazine photo shoot location.

Along the east coast, the shore is pounded by the Atlantic Ocean and protected by coral and sandstone cliffs. The area is not recommended for swimming, but, with a little bit of exploration, you can discover a private cove protected from the huge waves crashing into the ragged cliffs.

**SIX DESIGNS WORTH THE EFFORT TO BRING YOUR CLUBS**

Golf is a growing sport on Barbados. Six courses worthy of an afternoon outing include Royal Westmoreland, the two golf courses at tony Sandy Lane Resort (where Tiger Woods was married), Durant's Golf Club, Rockley Golf Course, and Apes Hill Golf Club, the newest course to open on the island.

"I have played golf for 15 years and try to sneak in a round occasionally," admits Rice. "I have the good fortune of teeing it up every so

often with Sir Garfield Sobers, our country's only national hero still living today." Sobers is a famed cricket player and until recently held the highest cricket test score in the world of 365 runs not out.

"Durant's Golf Club, in my opinion, is golf the way it should be. The course is mature, well maintained, and a joy to play. Apes Hill Golf Club is built out of an old limestone quarry and features some of the best island views of both the east coast and west coast."

**AN INVITATION TO SUNDAY LUNCH**

"It is hard to put into words, but, our greatest asset is the warmth of our

(Top) Harrison's Cave, a crystallized limestone cavern. (Left) St. Nicholas Abbey, built in 1658, is one of the last surviving and intact plantations in the Caribbean. (Below) The Cliffs Restaurant specializes in international cuisine.



Sandy Lane Resort

people," continued Rice. "We know you have a lot of great beach destinations to spend your vacation dollars. I think it is our caring attitude that results in almost 50 percent of visitors returning to our island and allows us to distance ourselves from all the other Caribbean islands.

"We understand tourism is our main industry and reality is, if we provide quality service with a caring attitude, you will come back. As a country, we know your visit effects our quality of life and our children's way of life. There is a well known Barbadian phrase, 'bet who bet you.' The translation is 'help those who help you,'" explained Rice.

"The best example of Bajan life is our Sunday island tradition. After church, families spend the afternoon together over a bountiful lunch. It's the one time each week generations come together, bond, and give thanks for what we have.

"This tradition," promised Rice, "is a reflection on our values, attitude, and a symbol of the experience you can expect in Barbados." ■

*Getting to Barbados from the USA: Passports are required. American (from New York JFK, Dallas/Fort Worth, and Miami), Delta (from Atlanta), US Airways (from Charlotte), and JetBlue (from New York JFK) service the modern Grantley Adams International Airport (BGI). Flight times range from 3 hours between Miami to 5 hours between Dallas and New York. The modern airport has an efficient customs hall and the departure area is equipped with power ports, televisions broadcasting CNN, and piped in music with pop culture music.*

*Time Zone: Barbados is on Atlantic Standard Time year round. During daylight savings time, it is one hour ahead of Eastern Standard Time.*

*Climate: Temperatures remain in a narrow range of 75 to 85 degrees all year. The dry season runs from January through June.*

*Currency: The Barbados Dollar (BBD) is fixed 2:1 to the U.S. Dollar. Credit cards are accepted everywhere, except in taxi cabs.*

*Traveling around Barbados: The British influence is clear once you leave the airport. Cars travel on the left side of the road. Taxis are easily recognizable with the letter "Z" on their license plates. Fares typically run US\$20-\$40. Rental cars are available and a temporary driver's license can be purchased for \$10. Bypass the organized bus tours and be adventurous—rent a car and GPS and go off the beaten track.*

*Insider Tips: Tap water is safe to drink (it filters naturally through the coral limestone rock on the island). Your computer/cell phone chargers will work. Roaming is expensive. Consider renting a cell phone from LIME or Digicel upon arrival.*

*If you wish to reach David Rice, please e-mail him at davidr@visitbarbados.org.*

*For more information about Barbados, please go to VisitBarbados.org.*